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ABSTRACT

The experience and identity of the writing teacher clearly impacts that teacher's pedagogy. Pedagogies are a result of many influences and forces, including conferences, training, articles and books read, but they are also formed from experiences as students, learners, and teachers. To acknowledge the experiential and personal influences on personal teaching styles might lead to understanding and valuing individual teaching styles. Before a pedagogy can be critiqued or revised, it needs to be understood. There is value in teachers exploring their own educational experiences as well as imagining ways in which their pedagogies can be an extension of their personalities and beliefs, rather than a contradiction to them. (CR)

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Learning to Value Our Different Teaching Styles

Based on my qualitative research study of three experienced college writing teachers I want to offer some suggestions around preparing and supporting teachers of writing. Broadly, I am interested in discovering ways in which teachers can be supported in developing pedagogies which are personally and experientially informed. I am concerned that by not expecting and even encouraging personally and experientially informed teaching, we ignore the experience and identity of the teacher which clearly greatly impacts teachers' pedagogies, just as the experience and identity of students greatly affects their approach to, and performance in, writing and school. Perhaps as teachers, and trainers of teachers, we can take a page out of the process book that we present to our students, and think of how it might apply to our own activity, and activity of teaching.

In my research I have aimed to discover how writing teachers' pedagogies are "constructed." I use the term constructed instead of say, created, because I like the way "constructed" suggests that there are a lot of pieces and parts to a pedagogy. Pedagogies are

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not instantaneous; they are not simply derived from one source (a training session for example), but rather, are a result of many influences and forces; yes, conferences, trainings, articles, and books we read, but also our own experiences as students, learners and teachers, also our own very identities, our personalities. In our formal discussions and in the literature we have short-changed the influence which teachers' own experience, identity and personality must, reasonable, shape classroom practice and behavior.

When we composition people talk about developing writing pedagogies, we tend to get into the business of advocating something: Either we advocate (or critique) a theory--why we ought to do something--or we advocate a practice--how to do something. When we sit together in a conference room discussing teaching writing we seldom admit the non-theoretical or practical reasons for <u>why</u> we teach the way we do. I think it would be useful to balance this advocacy work (as important and worthwhile as it is) with some non-judgmental reflection on <u>why</u> we teacher as we do, <u>why</u> we make the choices we make. What if we were to hear a teacher say, as Sabine, a teacher in my study said, "I think that...what I want to achieve in the classroom is really based on my experience in my college classes that I do not want to relive either as a teacher or a student...I try to look at my relationship with my students in terms of what I was missing [in my relationships with my teachers]"? To hear a teacher publicly--whether as a leader of a teaching training or as a keynote conference speaker--acknowledge

the experiential and personal influences on their teaching might set us all to thinking about ways to understand, and value, our own teaching styles. Why is it that this doesn't happen often, or, at least, from my way of seeing things, often enough?

I think the reasons we don't talk about the personal and experiential influences on our pedagogy are deeply rooted. First, despite the historic marginalization or composition studies (and maybe even because of this marganization), we follow the lead of much of academics in the humanities of seeking to legitimate our work by distancing ourselves from the personal and experiential, for fear that it will be seen as idiosyncratic, of little value. If we describe, advocate, and ultimately justify the work we do--teaching--on theoretical or so-called empirical grounds, we feel more legitimate, more professional. This is all made much easier by the fact that teaching is generally a very private act, or rather, an act which is public to our students (our inferiors[?], we must admit on one level), but private to our colleagues and our superiors. Under such apparent privacy, upholding the myth of a practice which is not sullied by messy influences of an individual teacher's personal and experiential paggage is not so hard.

I think reflecting about why we teach the way we do is not something most of u are in the habit of doing. I'm not saying there is not a lot of reflecting on teaching practice going on. I think there is. I've read lots of interesting pieces where teachers berate themselves, berate their students, berate a pedagogy. I

think what I'm calling for is something less judgmental, more in a nature of discovery. Before we can critique our own pedagogy and perhaps revise it, I think we need to understand it. In particular, I think it is necessary to listen to those very strong impulses we have sometimes--whether it's an impulse to correct every grammatical error in a paper or whether it's to leap into a discussion with a moralizing lesson--and rather than focus on whether it was a good pedagogical choice or a bad one, rather than to judge, to try and figure out the why behind our impulses.

This non-judgmental reflection could be particularly useful to consider when planning teacher training and development support sessions. When we work with new teachers, it might be useful to abandon the notion that they are non-teachers, blank slates to be added to, worked on. First, teaching as a non-formal activity is something people are doing long before graduate school. Second, even the most inexperienced teacher has had extensive experience with education, coming from the other end. I have found that the pedagogies of the teachers in my study can be read in terms of their own educational experiences: what they did not learn in school, what they didn't like in their college teachers, influence of teachers who, on reflection, modeled a pedagogy which today they look back on and still admire. Similarly, the teachers in my study have been shaped by their own identities--personal traits and beliefs; for example, in the case of another teacher, Phoebe, her reliance on and impressive success with peer review is consistent and complementary with her strongly help socialist views, her

extremely social nature, and her own personal preference for group work over individual work. These values of Phoebe's were there long before she was introduced to peer review at a training session. What I think we can learn from this example is the value of teachers' exploring their own educational experiences as well as imagining ways in which our pedagogies can be an extension of our personalities and beliefs, rather than a contradiction to them.

*I am indebted to Mary Belenky and her colleagues for their discussion of the ways women learn and, in particular, their characterization of "constructed knowledge" (Women's Way of Knowing, New Your: Basic Books, 1986).